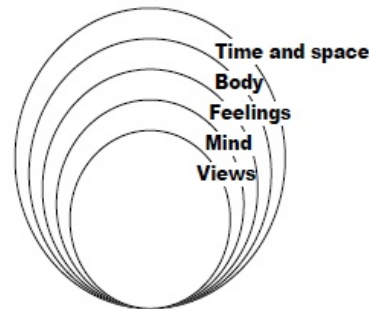


The Metta Bhavana

1. What is Meditation?

Meditation has been described in a number of ways, including 'the art of being with yourself' and 'a continuous stream of positive mental states.' A simple way of looking at it is it involves bringing awareness to the different aspects of our experience. In order to bring about a greater mental and emotional health and well being.

We can think of these aspects as being like Russian dolls nesting one inside the other. We first become aware of where we are in time and space. We become aware of all the moments of our life – past, present and future – and we try to arrive where we are now – in this present moment. Having done that we become aware of where we are in space, and gradually and consciously 'arrive' into our environment.



Once we are confident we are aware of our conditions in time and space, we can turn our attention to the next layer, which is our physical body. When we are absorbed in the demands of life we can tend to forget about our bodies. This is unfortunate, because we are often unconscious of when they are in a state of tension or sluggishness – except as a nagging sense of 'stress.' But if we turn towards our bodies with awareness – which we do in meditation – and take on the reality of the state they are in, we can create a sense of stability, relaxation and inner vitality that supports the mind in being calm, aware and positive.. But we do this on the bodies own terms. This is what we broadly mean by meditation posture. Once we have sorted out our body in meditation – which may mean aligning our skeleton so it can better support our weight, so our body can support us in being able to sit and pay attention, what we then look at then are our feelings. Are we feeling sad, or overexcited, or perhaps a bit growly?

At this point, once we are present in the moment, comfortable in our body, and aware of what we are feeling – in short we are aware of our experience and are containing it in a way that gives us the space to give our attention to other things – we have a foundation that will allow us to work on different aspects of our responses to life. We can then choose from a range of meditation practices: if we want to develop awareness, we could practice the mindfulness of breathing meditation; if we wanted to reflect on an aspect of life we could practice reflection; if we wanted to catch up with ourselves we could 'just sit' and experience ourselves; and if we wanted to work on our emotional life we could do the metta bhavana meditation.

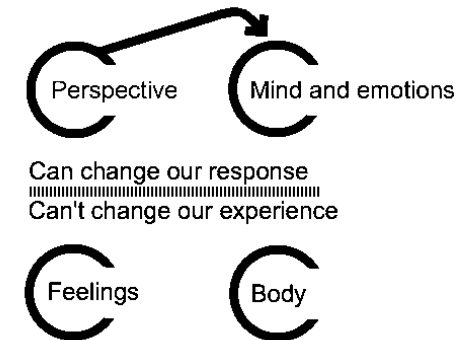
2. Experiencing and responding

Just as there are two aspects to our experience – our **body** and **feelings** – there are two

aspects to our response – our **mind** (our mental states, which includes our emotions!) and our **view** or perspective. Crucially, we cannot choose *what* we experience but we can choose *how* we respond to that experience.

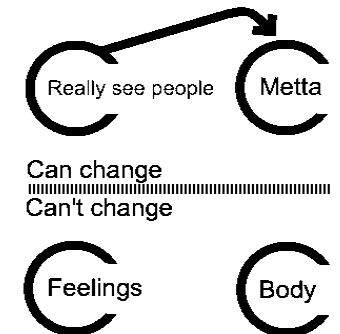
3. What is Emotion?

Our emotions are normally unthinking responses to our feelings – when we feel pain, we will tend to react with aversion; when we feel pleasure, we will tend to want more – but they don't have to be! We can, if we choose, have a more thinking response to our feelings, and this is called positive emotion. By changing our perspective – the way we understand things - we will change our emotional responses, because our emotions are influenced by how we understand things.



4. What is the Metta Bhavana?

Metta – translates (approximately) as 'unconditional friendship' or 'loving kindness' **Bhavana** – translates as 'cultivation' or 'development' We can therefore say that the **metta bhavana** is the cultivation of loving kindness – OR developing ourselves through unconditional friendship. It is concerned with cultivating emotional positivity and recognising that qualities like warmth, kindness and empathy are part of our natural makeup. The metta bhavana helps us change our perspective, and therefore our emotions, towards people - or more broadly, towards living beings. If we see people as objects, our emotion towards them will tend to be indifferent or even hostile. But, if we see them more roundedly - as people with feelings, hopes, and aspirations for happiness - then we are more likely to respond with care towards them. Metta therefore is an appropriate emotional response to the 'reality' of people as they are. That sensitivity to experience applies to every living being and so metta is **universal**. It is **unconditional**, i.e..not conditional on our having a particular experience in return (it might be painful for us when we see our enemy but because that 'real' perspective also applies to them we can still have metta for them.) And metta is potentially **limitless** in its intensity – that is the nature of all emotion: we can feel it more on more strongly. So with the metta bhavana we are simply creating a meditative space and putting the emotions we feel towards ourselves and others on the agenda. Once they are there, we then try to shift them towards a more 'realistic' perspective: one that takes in the reality of who we all are.



This is an excerpt from a metta bhavana handout from the Manchester Buddhist Centre (ideas from Mahabodhi, some text by Chandana, open to all) © Mahabodhi 2011

For a further article, on **Views and Emotions**

please go to: www.mahabodhi.org.uk/views_emotions.html